

ARTS

Meet San Diego's theater organ player, whose music creates a time machine to the 1920s



by Drew Sitton • Times of San Diego

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There are [old car](#) people. There are [aquarium people](#). And then there are theater organ people.

San Diego has its own.

“You either get it or you don’t,” said Russ Peck, who is known as the preeminent expert on theater organs from San Diego to Los Angeles. “It’s just what turns you on, and this thing... I just love these, I love playing on ‘em. Working on ‘em. It’s a way of life.”

In 1970, Peck heard his first pipe organ while at a music hall in Downey. The only song he had memorized on the piano was “Porky Pig at the Ice Show.” He played it over and over until he was forced to stop. Then, he spent years bugging his parents to get him an organ.

“I went nuts. Drove my parents crazy,” Peck recalled. ““Okay, the only way to shut this kid up is to get him an orchestra.””

The instrument’s massive power and sound drew in Peck. While behind the keyboards, he is not just a oneman band, but a one-man symphony orchestra.

At just seven years old, he had discovered his purpose in life.

Since then, Peck has dedicated himself to playing, tuning, maintaining and composing on the gigantic instruments.



Russ Peck inside the chamber of the Balboa Theatre organ on June 1, 2026.
(Screenshot by Tessa Balc/Times of San Diego)

Theater organs have a larger range and more instruments and sound effects included than traditional pipe organs.

Rather than only pipes, a unique section uses pressurized air to hit mallets and drum sticks on percussion instruments like drums, xylophones, glockenspiels and marimbas.

Additionally, that section has special effects meant to accompany silent films, like birds tweeting, cathedral bells and clanging wooden cups that sound like a horse trotting.

San Diego has only three publicly-available theater organs. In addition to the 1929 [Wonder Morton Organ](#) inside Balboa Theater, [Jacobs Music Center](#) has a 1921 Robert Morton organ built by the same Van Nuys-based company. That instrument originally resided in the Balboa Theatre before a transfer in 1929. The [final theater organ](#) is at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Spring Valley.



San Diego-based organist Russ Peck (Photo courtesy Balboa Theatre)

In Balboa Theatre's Wonder Morton, the smallest pipe is the size of a pencil, while the largest, 16 feet in length, [sounds like a foghorn](#). In total, there are 2,000 pipes covering 26 instruments.

Thankfully, the horses' hooves and percussion instruments don't need tune-ups. But pipes that emulate notes on tubas, oboes, flutes, violins and even a choir, known as vox humana, or "[human voice](#)," do require tuning.



Russ Peck demonstrates parts of the organ on Monday, June 1. (Screenshot by Tessa Balc/Times of San Diego)

Peck was at Balboa Theatre on June 1 for a grueling seven-hour tuning session with a team tuning 600 to 700 pipes in a hidden chamber 80 feet above the stage. The tuning takes place a week before every performance. This one was in preparation for his accompaniment of the 1923 comedy "Safety Last!"

At Silent Movie Mondays, an organist plays music during a silent film screening — the way the films were originally made to be shared. Balboa Theatre is gearing up for its third season of these screenings.

Theater organs first gained ground in the 1910s, as a cheaper way to accompany silent films than a multiinstrument band. They exploded in popularity the 1920s, before quickly falling out of fashion as soon as “talkies,” or films with sound, overtook the industry.

It’s challenging to get film rights, much less the original sheet music, so Peck puts together a score that combines his huge catalog of silent film music, classical music to the 1920s and popular music of the 1920s. To make it historically accurate, he does not use any music written after the film was made, other than sections he composes himself.

“You’re in this time machine and the outside world’s gone. You’ve gone back in time 100 years,” Peck said.

[Silent Movie Mondays](#) have been a way for Peck to share his love of the theater organ with an audience. He plays an opening theme while an elevator built into the stage raises the organ console, with Peck on its bench, to the stage level. The audience cheers wildly as more of Peck slowly becomes visible.

“That’s what they did in the ‘20s,” Peck said. “It’s the best part of playing a show, is riding the elevator.”

The screenings have developed devoted fans, with many dressing in ‘20s fashion or themed costumes. Film buffs and history aficionados alike lose themselves to a bygone era free of hand-held screens.

“We’ve really built an audience,” said Alejandra Enciso, a communications specialist for San Diego Theatres. “We have filled this theater; we’ve had to turn people away.”

The next season begins on Sept. 21 with “The Headless Horseman” (1922) accompanied by Ken Double.

“There’s great variety. There’s scary stuff, there’s comedy, there’s drama,” Peck said.



Ken Double plays the organ on its elevated platform inside Balboa Theatre. (Photo courtesy Balboa Theatre)

In the seven event season, Peck will perform twice in addition to curating the season. He accompanies a “Laurel & Hardy” triple feature for the holidays on Dec. 7 then family comedy “Grandma’s Boy” on May 3, 2027.

Find tickets, starting at \$18, and additional information [here](#).